

What If I Want To Wean My Baby?

Breastfeeding your baby for even a day is the best baby gift you can give. Breastfeeding is almost always the best choice for your baby. If it doesn't seem like the best choice for you right now, these guidelines may help.

IF YOU NURSE YOUR BABY FOR JUST A FEW DAYS, he will have received your colostrum, or early milk. By providing antibodies and the food his brand-new body expects, nursing gives your baby his first - and easiest - "immunization" and helps get his digestive system going smoothly. Breastfeeding is how your baby expects to start, and helps your own body recover from the birth. Given how very much your baby stands to gain, and how little you stand to lose, it just makes good sense to breastfeed for at least a day or two, even if you plan to bottle-feed after that.

IF YOU NURSE YOUR BABY FOR FOUR TO SIX WEEKS, you will have eased him through the most critical part of his infancy. Newborns who are not breastfed are much more likely to get sick or be hospitalized, and have many more digestive problems than breastfed babies. After 4 to 6 weeks, you'll probably have worked through any early nursing concerns, too. Make a *serious* goal of nursing for a month, call La Leche League or a certified lactation consultant if you have any questions, and you'll be in a better position to decide whether continued breastfeeding is for you.

IF YOU NURSE YOUR BABY FOR 3 OR 4 MONTHS, her digestive system will have matured a great deal, and she will be much better able to tolerate the foreign substances in commercial formulas. If there is a family history of allergies, though, you will greatly reduce her risk by waiting a few more months before adding *anything at all* to her diet of breastmilk. And giving nothing but your milk for the first four months gives strong protection against ear infections for a whole year.

IF YOU NURSE YOUR BABY FOR 6 MONTHS without adding any other food or drink, she will be much less likely to suffer an allergic reaction to formula or other foods later on; the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends waiting until about 6 months to offer solid foods. Nursing for at least 6 months helps ensure better health throughout your baby's first year of life, reduces your little one's risk of ear infections and childhood cancers, and reduces your own risk of breast cancer. And exclusive, frequent breastfeeding during the first 6 months, if your periods have not returned, provides 98% effective contraception.

IF YOU NURSE YOUR BABY FOR 9 MONTHS, you will have seen him through the fastest and most important brain and body development of his life on the food that was designed for him - your milk. Nursing for at least this long will help ensure better performance all through his school years. Weaning may be fairly easy at this age... but then, so is nursing! If you want to *avoid* weaning this early, be sure you've been available to nurse for comfort as well as just for food.

IF YOU NURSE YOUR BABY FOR A YEAR, you can avoid the expense and bother of formula. Her one-year-old body can probably handle most of the table foods your family enjoys. Many of the health benefits this year of nursing has given your child will last her whole life. She will have a stronger immune system, for instance, and will be much less likely to need orthodontia or speech therapy. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends nursing for *at least* a year, because it helps ensure normal nutrition and health for your baby.

IF YOU NURSE YOUR BABY FOR 18 MONTHS, you will have continued to provide the nutrition, comfort, and illness protection your baby expects, at a time when illness is common in formula-fed babies. Your baby is probably well started on table foods, too. He has had time to form a solid bond with you - a healthy starting point for his growing independence. And he is old enough that you and he can work together on the weaning process, at a pace that he can handle. A former U.S. Surgeon General said, "It is the lucky baby... that nurses to age two."

IF YOUR CHILD WEANS WHEN SHE IS READY, you can feel confident that you have met your baby's physical and emotional needs in the most normal, healthy way. In cultures where there is no pressure to wean, children tend to nurse for *at least* two years. The World Health Organization and UNICEF strongly encourage breastfeeding through toddlerhood: "Breastmilk is an important source of energy and protein, and helps to protect against disease during the child's second year of life." Our biology seems geared to a weaning age of between 2 1/2 and 7 years, and it just makes sense to build our children's bones from the milk that was designed for them. Your milk provides antibodies and other protective substances for as long as you continue nursing, and families of nursing toddlers often find that their medical bills are lower than their neighbors' for years to come. Research indicates that the longer a child nurses, the higher his intelligence. Mothers who nurse long-term have a still lower risk of developing breast cancer. Children who were nursed long-term tend to be very secure, and are less likely to suck their thumbs or carry a blanket. Nursing can help ease both of you through the tears, tantrums, and tumbles that come with early childhood, and helps ensure that any illnesses are milder and easier to deal with. It's an all-purpose mothering tool you won't want to be without! Don't worry that your child will nurse forever. *All* children stop on their own, no matter what you do, and there are more nursing toddlers around than you might guess.

WHETHER YOU NURSE FOR A DAY OR FOR SEVERAL YEARS, the decision to nurse your child is one you need never regret. And whenever weaning takes place, remember that it is a big step for both of you. If you choose to wean before your child is ready, be sure to do it gradually, and with love.